

Bike thefts in Vancouver significantly drop, thanks to registration app

Since the VPD signed on to beta test Project 529 in 2015, bike thefts in Vancouver have fallen every year and by 52 per cent overall

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Former VPD detective Rob Brunt, now outreach officer for Project 529, at the VPD property office in Vancouver. (Photo by Jason Payne/ PNG) (For story by Gord McIntyre) [PNG Merlin Archive] PHOTO BY JASON PAYNE /PNG

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Inside an East Vancouver police building, where few civilians have been, hundreds of bicycles are suspended in a contraption that operates like someone crossed an automatic parking system with a dry cleaner's garment conveyor.

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This conveyors holds 440 bikes that police have recovered. A couple of dozen more bikes, mostly big electric ones that are too heavy for the conveyor, lean against each other on the floor, like fallen dominoes.

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It takes 15 minutes for the conveyor to run through all the bikes, lifting them three storeys to line the space below the warehouse ceiling.

But it's nothing compared to just a few years back.

"When it was full, this area down below here was full, too," said Rob Brunt, a longtime Vancouver police veteran who retired a year ago but who still volunteers with the police force's bike-theft team, as his arm swept around to take in the floor area.

Most officers don't even go into the warehouse in the back, but instead wait at the front for evidence to be retrieved for them, Brunt said. One day, eight years ago, he needed to go into the warehouse and what he saw blew him away.

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"In 2015, this would have been the biggest bike store in British Columbia, for sure," he said. "I was like, 'Wow, we're doing great work (retrieving stolen bikes) ... but most bikes weren't getting back to their owners."

"There was no system, so we don't know, but maybe two per cent of the bicycles got returned."



Recovered stolen bikes are literally hanging from the rafters on a conveyor system at the VPD property office in Vancouver. PHOTO BY JASON PAYNE /PNG

Bikes are held for 90 days then sent to auction.

There are a couple of reasons so few bikes were being retrieved, Brunt said, including a lack of standardized serial numbers. It may have been easier finding a needle in a haystack than finding the one bike a theft victim was looking for.

Then Brunt heard about something called Project 529, a bit of anti-theft software crying out to be applied somewhere.

The program was invented by J Allard, a former Microsoft executive in charge of entertainment devices. It was Allard who led the team that created Xbox.

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Allard had stopped in Seattle while on his way to Crankworx in Whistler in 2011 and his team's bikes were stolen out of the back of his truck. The bikes were triple locked in a garage with on-site security, yet thieves took apart the bike rack and made off with the custom-built bikes.

“(Allard’s) was a unique, specialized bicycle,” Brunt said, “and from that minute J dropped into the deep end of policing.”

Allard filed a report, handed it in, and watched the officer drop the report onto a pile with others. When will the paperwork be filed, Allard wondered. Maybe in 24 hours, he was told.

“Well, 24 hours is a long time for a stolen bike,” Brunt said.

Weeks went by and Allard was alerted that his bike was for sale on Craigslist, but that still wasn’t enough grounds for Seattle police to obtain a warrant with no more than Allard’s word to go on. Brunt said it would have been no different in Metro Vancouver.

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So, slipping on his Sherlock hat, Allard found an ingenious way to get enough evidence — it involved buying a stolen laptop off the bike fence and finding the original owner on the hard drive — yielding a search warrant that turned up not just bicycles but store gift cards, power tools, phones, tablets, you name it.

“But J still had no proof of ownership and the judge said he couldn’t give him the bike,” Brunt said. “J’s like, ‘I see a problem here and I’m going to fix it.’”

He came up with Project 529, a bike registration program with a decal and unique seven-letter code that stays with the bike for life.

When an internet search led Brunt to Allard, the two hooked up, but it took a third partner, VPD Chief Adam Palmer to get the funds to start up Project 529.

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“J came up with the program, but didn’t have a place to use it,” Brunt said. “He was looking for a city to beta test it. ... The chief was motivated to do something, he wanted to fix this (bike-theft) problem and he believed in the (Project 529) program.”

It’s easy, and free, to register bikes online with Project 529. Snap a few photos from various angles, jot down your bike’s serial number and any identifying marks, and some 400 law enforcement agencies around the world will have access to your bike’s information (but none identifying you, other than an email address).



Recovered stolen bikes hang from a conveyor near the ceiling of the VPD property office in Vancouver. PHOTO BY JASON PAYNE /PNG

In the first six months of operation in 2015, 10,000 cyclists registered their bikes with the VPD's project. Today that number is three million worldwide as other police forces and institutions such as universities have joined the program, all the data stored on an Amazon server in Washington state.

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About 200,000 cyclists in Vancouver and within about 15 kilometres of the city have registered, based on GeoDASH stats.

Since Brunt started the program, bike thefts in Vancouver have fallen every year and by 52 per cent overall.

Before that, bike thefts in Vancouver had risen from about 1,500 a year in 2011 to 4,000 by 2015. VPD projections had that number swelling to 6,000 a year by now had Project 529 not been introduced.

Instead, there were 1,603 bikes reported stolen in Vancouver in 2022, and this year is on pace to be lower yet.

“You don’t usually see double-digit drops with property theft,” Brunt said.

Just having the Project 529 shield displayed on your bike is good theft protection.

“The shields are not impossible to get off, but it’s a real son-of-a-gun to do so and if you do file it off, we’ll see that.”

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Somewhat surprisingly, there’s almost zero market for bike parts, Brunt said, because it’s far easier to move a whole bike.

“A bike can trade hands five times in the first hour,” he said. “Then you’ve got these organized individuals who will purchase these bikes for pennies on the dollar then turn around and sell them on Craigslist or Facebook Marketplace.”

The project hasn’t just cut down on the number of bikes stolen, it’s freed up countless hours for other police work, as well.

“When we first started, I told the chief the public doesn’t have any faith in us to do anything with bike theft, so of course they’re not going to report a bike stolen if they don’t think they’re going to get it back.”

Running a serial number on a police database used to be like winning the lottery, Brunt said. He’s a cyclist, he’d run those numbers, but he wondered why any cyclist would see a point in doing so.

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“And now there’s a point.”

The onus is on registered cyclists who have had their bikes stolen to check online. But if the bike has been found by police, that is where you will get the good news, so keep checking back with Project 529’s website.

Brunt has been the only dedicated bike-theft detective he’s run across as he traverses the world spreading the Project 529 news, most recently in New Zealand.

Allard “has this phrase: The thieves are organized, we’re not that well-organized,” Brunt said. “We need to be organized so we’ll work with everybody, everywhere.”

Security tips

When you own dozens of high-end bikes, you secure them when they're in storage.

For Mark Moore, that means steel gates from RobberStoppers, a local company that's been providing security products since 1996.

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The last thing Moore, who owns Cit-E Cycles, wants is for something like what happened to his friends at Urban Machina in Kits after someone in an SUV tried smashing into the e-scooter store three weeks ago. Urban Machina's door and window are gated, too, and the thieves failed to gain entry.

"They use the same gates I use," Moore said. "I've never had one problem, no one has ever tried to break in — they see the gates and I think they just walk away and don't bother."

Perhaps.

But thieves are resourceful. They've been known to bypass triple layers of building security just to get into a bike room, where pairs of high end locks didn't deter them.

As bicycling.com put it in a May 30 article, "Bike thieves are criminals of opportunity, so you can decrease your risk by locking up more intelligently than the next cyclist. Let's run through the pros and cons of each genre to help you pick the best lock for your situation.

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"A thief with the right tools can defeat any bike lock in five minutes, but that doesn't mean all locks are created equal."

The bike site rates brands Kryptonite, Abus and Altor highly, citing locks that can slow a thief down or persuade them it's too much trouble. And doubling down with two locks makes it twice the effort and takes twice the time for a thief to abscond with your bike.

"Even the locks that are rated a 10 out of 10, if somebody's going around with power tools, they're going to get through," Moore said. "But two locks will definitely slow down a thief."

After double locking your bike, sticking a simple Project 529 decal on the frame might be the most effective theft-prevention measure.

"If a thief leaves a bike alone because it's shielded, that's fantastic," said Rob Brunt, who established the Vancouver Police Department's anti bike theft program in 2015.

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“Until somebody invents a better mousetrap, the shield is the simplest, cheapest and easiest thing to do.”

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